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SUBJECT: COMBATING CHILD TRAFFICKING IN GHANA: THE YEJI
PROJECT

11. Summary: A February 2006 trip by Pol FSN and International Organization for Migration (IOM) staff revealed that IOM's project to combat child trafficking in central Ghana, funded by the PRM Bureau, has had some successes. However, the project has also highlighted many challenges in combating trafficking in Ghana, including the need for greater sensitization and awareness, economic factors, weak law enforcement, and the difficulty of reintegrating rescued children. The Inspector General of Police told PolChief that enforcing Ghana's 2005 Trafficking in Persons law is difficult because parliament is ahead of the general population on the issue. Minister of Women and Children's Affairs Mahama told the Ambassador that Ghana plans to do more sensitization before moving forward on prosecutions. End Summary.

THE YEJI TRAFFICKED CHILDREN PROJECT

12. The Yeji Trafficked Children Project, run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), was launched in December 2002 with funding from the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. It is targeted at an estimated 600 fishermen and 1,000 trafficked children in eleven fishing villages around the village of Yeji in Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region. Since 2002, some 576 children have been rescued and re-integrated with their families in the Volta and Central Regions, while fishermen have been supported in adapting to alternative forms of income generation.

13. Friends of Human Development (FHD), a Ghanaian NGO that works in partnership with IOM, regularly meets with community heads and opinion leaders to educate them on the dangers of trafficking and the penalties imposed by Ghana's trafficking in persons law, enacted in December 2005. The group's aim is to convince "masters" to voluntarily give up trafficked children and accept training in other economic activities such as cattle rearing, cereal farming and micro-credit schemes allowing spouses to trade in non-fish products.

14. In February 2006, Political FSN traveled to Yeji with representatives of IOM to observe IOM efforts to rescue some fifty trafficked children. IOM successfully rescued thirteen of over fifty trafficked children who were screened. During a return trip in March, IOM officers rescued an additional 26 children. Several hundred trafficked children are still believed to be in communities dotting Lake Volta, an area that has become one of the most significant destinations in Ghana for internally trafficked persons.

OBSTACLES TO RESCUING TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

15. Although Ghana's trafficking in persons (TIP) law is relatively new, several community leaders and elders in the

Yeji area told Pol FSN and IOM officials that they are committed to eliminating trafficking. In the village of Adakrom, for example, the commitment of the chief and his elders ensured that thirteen out of 35 trafficked children screened several weeks earlier were rescued. While there is evidence that awareness of the new TIP law is growing in this and other communities, many challenges remain in securing community cooperation in combating trafficking. These include:

-- POOR AWARENESS: While fishermen in many remote localities appear genuinely ignorant of the TIP law, Pol FSN found that others simply ignore the law and the dangers associated with using trafficked children.

-- ECONOMIC FACTORS: Many fishermen told Pol FSN their priority is getting a return on the huge investments they have made in procuring the trafficked children. The fishermen rely heavily on these children to sustain their businesses and are discouraged by IOM's decision to reduce compensation to masters (in the form of micro-credit support for income substitution) from 1.2 million cedis (USD 132) to 500,000 cedis per year (USD 55). In the village of Dasikope, where ten trafficked children were screened by Friends of Human Development and IOM for possible rescue, many of the masters appeared visibly old and weak. Although they had agreed to participate in the rescue project, they ultimately backed out because they feared their fishing operations would not survive without the children.

-- MISINFORMATION: Agents of some masters peddle lies that rescued children are rented out to rich people in the cities for huge profits. These allegations generate cynicism and

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sometimes open hostility between NGOs and fishing communities.

-- WEAK LAW ENFORCEMENT: Local police and social welfare officials complained to Pol FSN and IOM officials about a lack of resources to implement the TIP law. Many local anti-trafficking committees, set up by communities to act as watchdogs, also complained about resource constraints. In many of these fishing communities, there are no police stations. Where stations do exist, the officers are often ignorant of the new trafficking law. In some cases, police and community leaders simply ignore NGO education and sensitization efforts due to strong cultural norms that condone trafficking.

THE DIFFICULTY OF REINTEGRATION

¶6. Community leaders and NGOs seemed to enjoy some cooperation and mutual goodwill in both source and destination communities. Sensitization programs have made an impact in both areas, and NGOs have worked hard to counsel victims and facilitate their return.

¶7. Nonetheless, there is insufficient attention to rehabilitating these traumatized children. Many have missed out on school, have lost their childhood and sometimes have to return to a class in school where they are much older than their peers. According to FHD, because of adjustment problems these children sometimes want to go back to their lives as trafficking victims. Some of the parents reject their children for fear of being asked to refund money they received from traffickers.

GOG ATTENTION TO TRAFFICKING

¶8. PolChief recently raised concerns about trafficking in Yeji with Inspector General of Police Patrick Acheampong and other senior police officials. The IGP responded that it was difficult to implement the TIP law and that parliament was ahead of the general population. There is a need for

significant education about TIP, he said, adding that in the Yeji area, a large majority of the local population does not view trafficking as an offense. They believe relatives send their children to work in fishing villages because of poverty and that many of these children have more prospects than they would in their villages, he said.

¶9. In a July 17 meeting with Minister of Women and Children's Affairs Hajia Alima Mahama, the Ambassador said that while passage of the TIP law was important, the GOG must make progress on enforcement. She said this was the main reason Ghana remained a Tier 2 ranked country in 2006. Prosecuting known traffickers in Yeji would send a very positive signal about GOG seriousness on this issue, she added. Mahama said the GOG was unhappy about its Tier 2 ranking, but had decided to do more sensitization work before moving to prosecutions. Mahama conceded that resource constraints are not a viable explanation for why police are not making arrests, but argued that the law may need to be broken down into individual regulations to facilitate arrests and prosecutions. Attempting to demonstrate GOG commitment to the issue, Mahama noted that she chaired a recent ECOWAS workshop in Nigeria on trafficking and that her ministry actively participated in an International Labor Organization workshop to develop an action plan to combat trafficking.

¶10. Asked by the Ambassador about the status of setting up a Child Trafficking Board, as stipulated in Ghana's TIP law, Mahama said the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWAC) has put together the membership, has identified a coordinator, and is discussing a date for inaugurating the Board. Mahama expects President Kufuor will approve the inauguration date soon, after which time the Board will be able to launch a Human Trafficking Fund.

COMMENT

¶11. Despite our efforts to encourage prosecutions, GOG officials clearly see awareness building as a bigger priority. The Chief Director of MOWAC reinforced this point in an Embassy Human Rights Roundtable on August 3, arguing that the GOG needs another year of awareness building before it makes sense to push for prosecutions. Some NGO contacts agree with this view, including the head of counter-trafficking programs for IOM/Ghana. They are concerned that premature efforts to arrest and prosecute traffickers in Yeji may alienate the local community and reduce cooperation for their rescue efforts.

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¶12. We will continue to press for arrests and prosecutions, in addition to encouraging awareness building, in what we believe needs to be a multi-dimensional approach to combating TIP in Ghana. Communities need greater sensitization; district assemblies need to devote more resources to support civil society on anti-TIP activities; the police need more training and awareness building; the media could do more to highlight the progress of rescued children; rescued children who do well should be assisted and held up as role models in their source and destination communities; economic support is needed for the parents of trafficked children to prevent recurrence. End Comment.
BRIDGEWATER